Congress Must Help Americans Afford Computers and Tablets To Access the Internet

Low-Income Americans Need Computers and Tablets To Connect

Computers and tablets enable people to apply for jobs, fill out government forms, or complete schoolwork -- tasks difficult or impossible to do online with just a mobile device. Computers and tablets also enable consumers without broadband at home to connect to Wi-Fi hotspots across their community. Despite significant investments in affordable broadband, our nation cannot close its digital divide without near-universal access to a computer or tablet. Unfortunately, many people, particularly the low-income, marginalized, or elderly, do not have a personal device.

- Across the country, more than 11% of households don't have a computer, and more than 5% have only a smartphone. Many more households, including 32% of Latinx families home-schooling during the pandemic, do not have enough computers or tablets, forcing families to make difficult decisions about who gets access to complete vital online activities -- and who doesn't.
- Low-income and marginalized communities, as well as seniors, are particularly likely to need computers and tablets. Just 59% of households making less than $30,000 a year have a computer. African American and Latinx households are more than twice as likely as white households to lack a home computer. More than 7.2 million people aged 65+ do not have a computer at all.
- People want help getting a computer or tablet. In Salt Lake City, Utah, 72% of those seeking help in getting connected requested a computer.
- Computers and tablets are critical for both school and work. One study shows that access to a computer and the internet has better educational outcomes than internet access alone. Michigan's recent report shows that students using "smartphones only" have lower school performance. Job seekers without a computer or tablet, forced to use a smartphone, face significant challenges -- 47% had problems accessing job-related content, and 37% had trouble submitting the files necessary to apply for a job.
- The inability to afford a computer or tablet is jeopardizing home broadband connectivity. Thirty-one percent of non-broadband users cite the cost of a computer as one of the reasons they do not have broadband at home.

Congress Must Help Consumers Get Computers and Tablets

In order to ensure that all Americans can connect to the internet, Congress must help low-income consumers who cannot afford a computer or tablet. *Our nation simply cannot close the digital divide without Congressional action.* **We urge Congress to enact legislation providing a $500 voucher to help low-income consumers purchase a computer or tablet directly from a retailer or refurbisher.** This program should:

- Ensure the voucher enables low-income consumers to access no-cost computers and tablets by covering the device, taxes, and shipping costs;
- Prevent consumers from using a broken or outdated computer or tablet by providing a new voucher every four years and offering a warranty and technical support;
- Enable multiple individuals per household to receive a voucher so that families can connect simultaneously;
- Allow a wide range of consumers to access a computer or tablet, including individuals with incomes below 150% of the poverty line and those participating in a variety of assistance programs (including SNAP, Pell, Free/Reduced School meals, etc);
- Ensure robust enrollment by eligible populations by empowering the federal agency administering the program to both advertise the program and help consumers, community organizations, and retailers navigate it.